

Ethnology 3010-001

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Title: *The Experience of Modern Day Paganism in the United States and Ireland*

Originating in Britain in the late 1800's neo-paganism was a response to the industrial revolution. In the 1950's Gerald Gardner (famous for the Gardnerian witchcraft movement) introduced Wicca and it spread to the United States. He is a self-proclaimed Renaissance man who has influenced the neo-pagan, neo-shaman, and goddess movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through the present. Though men are often credited with introducing neo-paganism to the Western world, women were quickly on the scene in the 1960's and 1970's bringing Dianic Witchcraft to women's circles thanks to those such as Zsuzsanna Budapest and her early writings including "The Holy Book of Women's Mysteries" and followed by Starhawk and her Reclaiming tradition. Starhawk and Reclaiming is where Sabina Magliocco looked when beginning her fieldwork study of the American goddess movement within the context of neo-paganism. Jenny Butler's research centered on Ireland where a strong neo-pagan movement exists. Both anthropologists relied on participant observation as well as interviews, but differences exist in their approach, their experiences and in their presentations of their work. This paper seeks to compare the similarities as well as differences.

It would be difficult to imagine anyone studying the world of neo-paganism or women's spirituality without immersing themselves in the ceremony and ritual that is the foundation of the movement, and any practices groups adopt. While interviews would serve a purpose in understanding what motivates participants, how they came to find the movement, the

demographics who are drawn to these types of environments and what those involved hope to achieve. However, it is only in digging deep within the self and standing in the circles as a fully embodied and actively engaged person that anyone would be able to have a complete understanding of these activities. Both Butler and Magliocco engaged in participant observation. It is in the presentation of the material where we see the ethnologies take a diverging path. Dr. Butler is a folklorist and scholar. According to her website she is the first researcher of “Irish contemporary Paganism” to complete an ethnography of the movement. Her ethnography is clear and concise, but also stands to remove her from the dialogue of the research. She has written multiple book chapters, journal articles, peer reviewed articles and presented her ongoing work at conferences around the globe. Butler makes it clear in her work that though the research was done, in part, as participant observation, she “took part in...rituals, seasonal festivals and other kinds of gatherings” with full disclosure to those around her the reason she was taking part in the community.

This is in direct opposition to Magliocco whose writing was more of an autoethnography, and the reader could fully glean her investiture into the experience as well as the research. Where Butler’s writing is very clinical in nature and written from a top down view, Magliocco was in the midst of ecstatic experience and fully immersed in her research. “Establishing rapport with Pagans meant becoming a trusted member of the community by forming relationships in which favors, confidences, and information flowed in both directions; in the process, a number of my subjects became close friends.” She is very clear within this framework that she not only took part in the community but became part of the fabric of the women’s circle that was part of her work. She also quotes Jone Salomonsen, an anthropologist focused on gender studies who reminds her “there is no outside where the observer can literally put herself. In the practice of

modern mystery religions, you are either in, or you are not there at all.” Yet, Magliocco acknowledges she is both an insider and outsider as she moves through her research as both participant and observer.

Magliocco not only participated in the community rituals of the community she was studying, but she also inadvertently moved into a neighborhood near Berkeley whose inhabitants were a who’s who of neopagan leaders called “Witches Row”. She realized she could not remain an impartial observer as she conducted research.

When considering the participant observation method, one cannot leave out the work of Jone Salomonsen, previously quoted by Magliocco. She participated in the Reclaiming tradition and was part of a coven for 10 years resulting in her book *Enchanted Feminism: Ritual, Gender and Divinity a month The Reclaiming Witches of San Francisco*. Her focus was on personal growth and how these movements fuel cultural-religious change. Whereas Butler’s focus is primarily on the face value and telling the story of neo-pagans and the movement in Ireland and Magliocco’s ethnography focuses on the experience, Salomonsen and her research on Starhawk’s Reclaiming tradition is largely focused on women leaving patriarchal religions and stepping intentionally into new nature based traditions that have loosely tied threads to older lore.

In addition to participant observation, only Butler used interview methodology to gain an understanding into the individuals and the communities that make up the neo-pagan groups they researched. Jenny Butler states she interviewed 36 interlopers to gain knowledge of their perspective of being part of their community. She was careful not to identify them but did quote them directly. She was looking for experience and viewpoints from those she interviewed. This process is evident in her writing as it gives her the viewpoint of a third-person narrator and not solely a first-person participant researcher, though it is clear in her social media and in her other

works that she is most likely a participant outside of her work as a researcher. In regard to Butler's interview process, it is difficult to gauge how she interacts with her subjects when in interview mode, though it is clear that when she acted as interviewer her lines were clearly drawn. Despite repeated attempts to find further information, it was not readily clear in her published works why she takes the approach that she does.

The methodologies of the anthropologists are clear, but what of the theories they apply when in the field? It is difficult to assign a specific anthropological theory to any of these ethnologies. In fact, with the intersectionality of neo-paganism, especially where it crosses feminism, there is not clear picture of any of the author's approach. For example, neo-paganism is a stand-alone religious (though most prefer the term "spiritual") movement that encapsulates various traditions and teachings. However, it draws elements from folklore and previously documented traditions from Europe. Some incorporate aspects of shamanism, borrowing from various traditions in North America, Peru, and Africa. This implies the application of diffusion and the spread of culture from its place of origin, especially as many neo-shamans travel to study directly with shaman of the traditions they incorporate. Certainly, Magliocco and Salomonsen have an understanding of diffusionism when discussing the origins of neo-paganism. Butler's research, however, is unique as she is focused on Ireland and the neo-pagan traditions there largely draw upon histories of the Irish people as well as folklore that has been handed down there and not borrowed from other traditions.

Salomonsen largely takes a structuralist approach. She is focused on the culture within the traditions, specifically Starhawk's Reclaiming tradition. Socio-culture is a major theme in her ethnography and there is no doubt with the focus on Starhawk in much of the writing that functionalism comes into play. "The motivation for my own inquiry has thus been to move

beyond idealized narrative, sweeping generalizations and superficial surveys to present a joint ethnography and theological analysis of a single community (Reclaiming) and a single author (Starhawk).”

Functionalism as a whole appears to be Magliocca’s approach as she is distinctly focused on the autoethnological experience in her work, though there is a structuralist component as well. In fact, she “shifts between engagement and distance, so symbols, lyrics, movement, artifacts, structures, and social interaction.... must be remembered and noted when the event is over.” She draws on Solomonsen’s work as well as her own theory of “compassion” in ethnological research. It is the recognition of not being wholly an “objective observer” but allowing oneself to shift in framework of the individual experience and the researcher.

Anthropologists have many things to consider when entering into research. The decision to act as observer or participant, the application of theory based on the nature of the work and the ethics involved when studying culture. Butler addresses this head on by stating it must “be clear that their role is that of a researcher who is collecting data for academic analysis.” Her firm stance on this is reflected in her writing and her outside looking style of writing she employs. Even as a participant observer she understands her outsider/insider place and appears to keep the ethics question at the forefront of her work.

Magliocco seems less clear on ethics and in fact does not mention it all in her writing. She does, however, state she “tried to tread a fine line between sharing too much of my experience, turning this into an autoethnography” though upon reading “Witching Culture” it is difficult to not read it as such. Similarly, for Salomonsen, there is no clear discussion of ethics, however, the tone of her writing implies certainly the understanding of them. She was fully immersed for many years in the community she was studying and though her work is full of personal

anecdotes, it takes a middle of the road approach – neither a clinical one nor a wholly first person focused on her own experience which lends a real or imagined air of understanding of the importance of ethics.

All three anthropologists offer an unapologetic view of the history and trends in neo-paganism and women's spirituality. Regardless of the theory applied or the methodology used, they presented clear and contextual ethnologies that are informative and enticing. Their views were refreshing as they could have taken the stance of dismissal or disdain, even within the framework of relativism, which some writers have taken in exploring this culture. They chose instead to immerse themselves and have offered a broad understanding of the neo-pagan communities, the layered nuances, and how people, largely women, have found themselves in the realm of great culture change.

\*\*\*On a personal note, I have been part of these communities in Middle Tennessee for over 25 years as a leader, a participant and a business owner who works solely with individuals and businesses in the neo-pagan and women's spirituality communities. These were very well written and very reflective of the communities and culture they speak of.

Magliocco, Sabina 2004. *Witching Culture: Folklore and Neo-Paganism in America*.

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